Terrorism: Threat and Response

Compiled by
Carolyn Pumphrey
Triangle Institute for Security Studies

Key Insights:

- We must clarify our threat assumptions and develop a coherent strategy for the war on terrorism.
- We must reorganize many of our internal security institutions and procedures so as to ensure comprehensive strategic planning, operational coherence, and effective flow of information.
- We must find ways to fight terrorism without sacrificing our civil liberties.
- We cannot fight terrorism alone; cooperation at home and abroad will be vital to our success.
- The U.S. Armed Forces have a limited and supporting role to play in homeland defense within U.S. borders, but should be prepared to provide assistance in a time of crisis.
- We must rely on all instruments of national power; military power may at times be essential, but it will never be sufficient.

On February 27 and 28, 2002, the U.S. Army War College and the Triangle Institute for Security Studies sponsored a conference entitled "Terrorism: Threat and Response," whose goal was to clarify the nature and causes of terrorism and debate our strategic options. Some 150 persons attended the conference, including former policymakers, uniformed and civilian members of the Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State, the intelligence community, the business world, local government and academia. This brief summary outlines the main points raised during the meeting.

Terrorism is a term of elastic definition that historically has been applied to a wide variety of phenomena. Key debates center on who qualifies as a terrorist, what methods terrorists employ, what their motives are, and who their victims are. Particularly contentious is the question of whether state actors can be considered terrorists, and whether terrorism should be viewed as personally motivated crime or politically motivated war. We are unlikely to reach a consensus because the ambiguity of the term is politically useful.

There are some obvious causes of terrorism. Political and social ills and the existence of intractable conflicts have bred terrorists and given them a support group. Globalization has led to the discovery of new ways to make war and generated new sources of resentment, as for example modernity. Terrorism also results from the growing inequalities of power. It is the tactic of those who cannot hope to win a conventional military contest. Still, terrorism defies generalization, and we should analyze its roots on a case-by-case basis.

The so-called "new" terrorism is of particular concern. Not everyone agrees that willingness to inflict mass casualties and to kill for killing's sake represents a radical departure from traditional terrorist patterns. However, many contemporary international terrorists do pose unique challenges. In particular, they often lack the kind of signatures our military and intelligence services have been designed to detect. Moreover, they have learned from the past and from one another and are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

Most terrorist groups probably could not make and deliver lethal biological agents or make chemical poisons on the scale needed to inflict mass casualties. While they might get hold of "loose nukes" from the former Soviet Union, they probably could not make a fission weapon. However, a combination of hostile intentions and evolving capabilities makes this a threat we cannot afford to underestimate.

In recent decades some thinkers have encouraged Muslims to go beyond the traditional *jihad*, the struggle to be a good Muslim, and spread their values and faith. Increased literacy has also made Muslims more conscious of Islam as a worldwide community. Conservatism has been fuelled by social, economic, and political disillusionment in the Arab World. Many Muslims are also angered by American support for corrupt Arab regimes. Religious extremism, however, is not unique to Islam, and Muslim law opposes violence against civilians.

Because of this, religiously motivated terrorists must find ways to justify their violence to themselves and their publics. Neutralization theory, as developed by the criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957), analyzes this process. It shows, for example, how criminals blame forces beyond their control, dehumanize their victims, and appeal to higher authorities to rationalize their actions. By presenting terrorists with alternative interpretations of their behavior, we may be able to preempt some attacks.

*****

Warning intelligence (a process designed to avoid harm) is vital, but difficult. Modern terrorists are hard to detect, and both the overabundance of information and compartmentalization of intelligence can impede analysis. Terrorists, moreover, can choose their own time, methods, and targets, and always have the option of cancellation. Both warning too often or warning too little is dysfunctional, and warning must be timely to be effective. We must expect, therefore, occasional failures.

Intelligence also plays a vital role in supporting combat operations against terrorism. The most effective way to disrupt and deter terrorist attacks is to go on the offensive. Unfortunately, few terrorists are directly vulnerable to military force. In future operations we will likely need to be better attuned to political sensitivities. This places a premium on our ability to coordinate and focus interagency counterterrorism efforts and to share intelligence with allies and coalition partners.

To combat terrorism we will need to build international coalitions. Experience will not necessarily provide a clear guide. Coalitions are likely to be less durable than they were in the past, and we are likely to form untraditional partnerships with old rivals, small powers capable of making niche contributions, and even private organizations. To improve our chances of success, we must avoid unilateral decisions and be sensitive to the interests of other nations when it comes to the formulation of foreign policy.

One goal should be to get all governments to agree to find and deal with terrorists within their borders. We will also have to deal with the "supply-side" problems of terrorism and the widespread alienation of Arab peoples. We must address the underlying social, political, and economic distress; do a better job of projecting our values; and make sure that our foreign policy reflects a more balanced sense of compassion.

We must also take care not to be shortsighted in our policies. Afghanistan, for example, is and will remain a vital crossroads connecting Central, South, and Southwest Asia. What happens here will continue to affect stability and security in this part of the world. Powerful centrifugal forces in Afghanistan, however, have been deepened by decades of war and misrule. If we do not wish this country to revert to being a sanctuary for terrorists, we must take steps to rebuild the state and restore its prosperity.

The world is changing faster than our internal processes and structures. We need to reform our organizations and processes to ensure comprehensive strategic planning and operational coherence. The Hart-Rudman Commission (January 2001) suggested that homeland defense should be viewed as a new element of national security and be assigned to the National Security Council. However, its policies were not adopted, and the debate over how to reform our institutions continues.

Complicating our efforts to defend our homeland is our desire to preserve our civil liberties. There is nothing unconstitutional about rebalancing and adjusting liberties if this helps ward off threats which themselves undermine those liberties. To date, executive branch initiatives to increase security have been reasonable. Historically, however, reasonable measures can and have been abused. The temptation to commit acts that may jeopardize our civil liberties will increase, moreover, as our sense of threat increases.

Within U.S. borders the role of the military traditionally has been limited and supporting. In the event that the state is overwhelmed, however, it is likely to be called upon and must prepare accordingly. DOD plans to establish Northern Command to streamline and unify its efforts. It is currently debating how to resolve difficult issues such as the over-tasking of personnel, how to organize, train, and equip units for its new mission, and the evolving interpretation of Posse Comitatus.

Outside of the United States, the military will play a more or less important role depending on what grand strategy we adopt. This, in turn, must be dictated by our basic threat assumptions. The use of our armed forces against states that support terrorists will be appropriate if (and only if) the central threat comes from terrorists dependent on such support. If the real threat comes from rogue states such as Iraq, we must go after such nations. If, however, failed Arab states are the problem, we should not extend our campaigns

unnecessarily, as this will only crystallize anti-American feelings.

To win the war on terrorism we must win the information war. Since mid-February, however, media coverage of the war has been rather negative. On several occasions, the military caused civilian casualties because it attacked before waiting for conclusive proof that it was targeting enemies. The military presumed that this was appropriate given the circumstances (a context of war), whereas the press presumed that it was not (a post-war context). In its briefings, however, DOD signally failed to make its presumptions clear.

Finally, policy, set by our political leaders, must guide strategy, defined as the calculated relationship among ends, ways, and means. Our biggest challenge is to define the right objectives. Evidence suggests that state failure is perhaps the key cause of conflict (and terrorism) today. Thus, the stated policy goals of the United States should be to promote and preserve legitimate governance and to do so in a multilateral way, using all the instruments of power at our disposal.

*****

*****